

Kingdom of Ait Abbas

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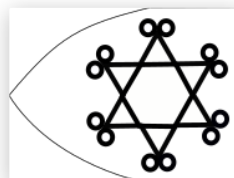
The **Kingdom of the Ait Abbas** or **Sultanate of the Beni Abbas** ([Berber languages](#) : ⵜⴰⵎⴰⵔⵜ ⵏ ⵓⴽⴰⵏ ⵏ ⵉⵎⵎⴰⵔ, romanized: *tagelda n At εebbas*; [Arabic](#) : سلطنة بني عباس *salṭanat Beni ʿabbas*), was a [Berber](#) state of North Africa, then a fief and a principality, controlling Lesser [Kabylie](#) and its surroundings from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century. It is referred to in the Spanish historiography as "reino de Labes";^[1] sometimes more commonly referred to by its ruling family, the Mokrani, in Berber *At Muqran* ([Arabic](#) : أولاد مقران *Ouled Moqrane*). Its capital was the

Kingdom of Beni Abbas

ⵜⴰⵎⴰⵔⵜ ⵏ ⵓⴽⴰⵏ ⵏ ⵉⵎⵎⴰⵔ, Tagelda n Ait Abbas

سلطنة بني عباس, *salṭanat Beni ʿabbas*

1510–1872



Flag



Kingdom of Ait Abbas at its greatest extent in the end of the 16th century.

Capital

[Kalâa of Ait Abbas](#)



Religion	<div><div>• Islam</div><div>• Minorities: Christianity and Judaism</div></div>
Government	Monarchy
Sultan	
<div><div>• 1510–1559</div><div>• 1871–1872</div></div>	<div><div>Abdelaziz Labes</div><div>Boumezrag El Mokrani</div></div>
Historical era	Early modern period
<div><div>• Established</div><div>• Disestablished</div></div>	<div><div>1510</div><div>1872</div></div>
Preceded by	Succeeded by
<div><div> Hafsid dynasty</div><div> Zayyanid dynasty</div></div>	<div><div> French Algeria</div></div>
Today part of	<div><div> Algeria</div></div>

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Founded by last [Hafsid dynasty](#) emirs of [Bejaia](#), the kingdom was for a long time a bastion of resistance to the [Spaniards](#), then to the [regency of Algiers](#). Strategically located on the road from [Algiers](#) to [Constantine](#) and from the [Mediterranean Sea](#) to [the Sahara](#), its capital [Kalâa of Ait Abbas](#) attracted [Andalusians](#), [Christians](#) and [Jews](#) in the sixteenth century, fleeing [Spain](#) or [Algiers](#). Their know-how enriched a local industrial fabric whose legacy is the handicraft of the Ait Abbas tribe. The surrounding



At its peak, the influence of the kingdom of Ait Abbas extended from the [valley of the Soummam](#) to the [Sahara](#) and its capital the Kalâa rivalled the biggest cities. In the seventeenth century, its chiefs took the title of *sheikh of the Medjana*, but were still described as sultans or kings of the Beni Abbés.^[1] At the end of the eighteenth century, the kingdom led by the Mokrani family (Amokrane) broke up into several clans, some of which became vassals of the regency of Algiers. However, the Sheikh of the Medjana maintained himself at the head of his principality as a tributary of the Bey of Constantine, managing his affairs independently.

With the arrival of the [French](#), some Mokrani took the side of the colonisers, while others sided with the resistance. The French, to strengthen their hold in the region, relied on the local lords, maintaining an appearance of autonomy of the [region](#) under its traditional leaders until 1871. Its sovereigns assumed various titles, successively sultan, *amokrane*^[2] and sheikh of the Medjana. Temporarily integrated into the French military administration before the revolt of 1871, they were known as khalifa and bachagha. The defeat of 1871 marked the end of the political role of the Mokrani with the surrender of the Kalâa to the French.

History 1510–1830

The Maghreb political space in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries



Hafside coin of Bejaia (1249–1276).

eastern part of the present-day [Maghreb](#), was part of the [Hafsid kingdom](#). In this kingdom, the city of [Bejaia](#), the ancient capital of the [Hammadids](#) in the eleventh century, was a prominent city. Indeed, its wealth and its strategic port location

made it an object of covetousness for the [Zayyanids](#) and the [Marinids](#); moreover, it often dissented within the [Hafsid sultanate](#), and enjoyed a certain autonomy in normal times. The city was seen as the capital of the western regions of the Hafsid sultanate and it's "frontier place". In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries it became, on various occasions, the seat of power of independent emirates–governors^[3] or dissidents from the [Hafsid dynasty](#). These "sovereigns of Béjaïa"^[4] extended their authority – which often went hand in hand with political dissent – to the entire domain of the ancient kingdom of the [Hammadids](#): [Algiers](#), [Dellys](#), [Medea](#), [Miliana](#), [Constantine](#), [Annaba](#) and the [oases of the Zab](#). [Ibn Khaldun](#) describes them as ruling "Biḡāya wa al-ṭagr al-garbī min Ifriqiya" (the city of Bejaia and the western march of Ifrīqiya). Ibn Khaldoun was also the vizier of the independent administration of a Hafsid prince of Béjaïa in

of the sixteenth, [Leo the African](#) and Al-Marini described a prince of Bejaia, distinct from Tunis, in a position similar to [Constantine](#) and [Annaba](#), reflecting a fragmentation of Hafsid territory.^[6] These last emirs of Bejaia, independent of the central power of Tunis, were the origin of the dynasty that was to found and direct the kingdom of Beni Abbas.

Foundation at the beginning of the sixteenth century

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Map of the kingdom of Kuku and the kingdom Ait Abbas (Labes) according to the

In 1510, as part of the [Reconquista](#), the [Spaniards](#) seized [Bejaia](#), which was in the hands of dissident Hafsid emirs. They organized raids in the hinterland from this position. The Berbers of the region sought protection in the interior and took as their new capital the

city was an ancient fortified place of the [Hammadid](#) era and a staging point on the *triq sultan* the commercial route going from [Hautes Plaines](#) to [Béjaia](#). Abderahmane, the last of the emirs of Bejaia, chose the site for security reasons. His son Ahmed became famous for his religious status with the Kabyle and Arab tribes in the region who settled in the Kalâa, fleeing the relative chaos in the country. Benefiting from growing support among the surrounding tribes, he proclaimed himself "Sultan of the Kalâa". He was buried in Takorabt, a village in the vicinity of the [Kalâa](#).^{[7][8]}

The reign of his grandson Abdelaziz El Abbas brought the name of the Kalâa to wider attention: at its peak, the city had 80,000 inhabitants.^[9] The Kalâa was equipped with weapons factories with the help of Christian renegades as well as some of the inhabitants of [Bejaia](#) driven out by the Spanish occupation, including Andalusians, Muslims, as well as a Jewish community who were welcomed for their know-how.^[10]



Map of
Béjaia in the
16th
century.

Alliance with Algiers

Following successive annexations of territory, the kingdom of Ait Abbas Under Abdelaziz extended to the south and the surrounding mountains. The [Spaniards](#), who had fallen back into [Bejaia](#), offered him their alliance, and he temporarily ignored the establishment of the [regency of Algiers](#) led by the [Barbarossa](#) brothers because his kingdom was not oriented towards the sea. The Barbarossa brothers, wishing to isolate the Spaniards, attacked Abdelaziz and met him around Bejaïa in 1516. Faced with the



the Turks immediately with inadequate resources.^[11] In 1542, the [regency of Algiers](#) made the lord of the Kalâa, his *khalifa* (representative) in the [Medjana](#).^[12]

Abdelaziz used his reign and periods of peace with the Regency to fortify the Kalâa and to extend his influence further to the south. His infantry became a regular corps of 10,000 men, and he bought two regular cavalry corps. He built two borjs around the Kalâa, each with a khalifa (representative), who was in charge of making tours through his territory.

^[13]

This increasing power of the Sultan of the Kalâa worried the Turks of the regency of Algiers who, in 1550, twice sent troops that Abdelaziz repulsed. [Hassan Pasha](#) therefore concluded a treaty with him and obtained his aid in his expedition against Tlemcen (1551), then occupied by Sherif [Saadi](#). According to the Spanish contemporary writer [Luis del Mármol Carvajal](#), Abdelaziz commanded an infantry corps of 6,000 men for the Tlemcen expedition. According to historian Hugh Roberts, the Kabyle contingent amounted to 2,000 men.^{[14] [15]}

The arrival of [Salah Rais](#) at the head of the [regency of Algiers](#) confirmed the alliance with Abdelaziz, and they jointly led the [Touggourt Expedition \(1552\)](#). Abdelaziz sent 180 arquebusiers and 1,600

Raïs. The Berbers of Abdelaziz dragged way guns, hoping to learn how to maneuver them and know how to hoist them up to their fortress of the Kalâa.



Elements of Andalusian architecture of the Mausoleum of Sultan Ahmed.

War with Algiers

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Two hypotheses explain the eventual rupture with Algiers, according to Spanish historiography. The first is that Salah Rais tried to arrest Abdelaziz during his time in Algiers, suspecting him of wanting to raise the country against the [regency of Algiers](#). The second is that Abdelaziz was suspicious of the Turks and their ability to attack distant cities like [Touggourt](#). He feared that their ambition to control the country would end up making his kingdom a target and considered it a political mistake to have favored them through the two expeditions. The narratives of the Aït



refused to murder a chief of the same region and warned him instead. Allied with the Zouaoua, the troop of Sultan Abdelaziz defeated the [Janissaries](#) who had to retreat to Algiers.^[16]

Salah Rais, for fear that the reputation of Sultan Abdelaziz would increase, launched an expedition in late 1552 and reached the Boni Mountains near the Kalâa by winter. Abdelaziz's brother, Sidi Fadel, died in battle but the snow prevented the Turks from advancing further and exploiting their victory.^{[17][18]}

In 1553, the son of Salah Rais, Mohamed-bey, led an offensive on the [Kalâa of the Beni Abbes](#) which resulted in defeat and many losses among the Turks. Their reputation was tarnished by this battle because they avoided a disaster thanks to the support of the Arab tribes. Abdelaziz also repelled an expedition commanded by [Sinan Reis](#) and Ramdan Pasha near Wadi el Hammam, towards [M'sila](#). The capture of Bejaia by Salah Rais in 1555 confirmed Abdelaziz's fears about the power of the [regency of Algiers](#) and he continued to strengthen his positions in the mountains. However, Salah Rai died and the return of Hassan Pasha allowed a return to peace for a year. Hassan Pasha delivered the town of M'sila and its defenses including 3 pieces of artillery to Abdelaziz, while maintaining control over tax contributions.^{[19][20][21]}

Abdelaziz was therefore in possession of the city of M'sila and raised an army of 6,000 men



The troops of the regency of Algiers allied to the kingdom of Beni Abbas marching towards [Tlemcen](#).

tax normally intended for the Turks of the Regency. Hassan Pasha declared war on him in 1559, took M'sila without difficulty and fortified Bordj of

[Medjana](#) and the [Bordj Zemoura](#). These two forts and their garrisons were immediately destroyed by a counter-attack by Abdelaziz who also took the artillery pieces to improve the defense of the Kalâa. Hassan Pasha, married to the daughter of the [King of Kuku](#), formed an alliance with the latter to put an end to the sultan of Kalâa. He brought him to [battle in front of the Kalâa](#) in 1559, without being able to take it and suffering many losses. However, his rival Sultan Abdelaziz died on the second day of the fighting and his brother Sultan Ahmed Amokrane, his chosen successor, drove back the Turkish and Kuku forces. This decisive victory of the Kalâa made Hasan abandon his ambitions for a time; he consoled himself by who carrying the head of Abdelaziz to [Algiers](#) as a trophy. ^{[22][23][19]}

The kingdom at its peak

In 1559,
sultan
Ahmed
Amokrane

and welcomed renegades from Algiers as well as



Conquests of Ahmed Amokrane, late 16th century

Christians, authorised

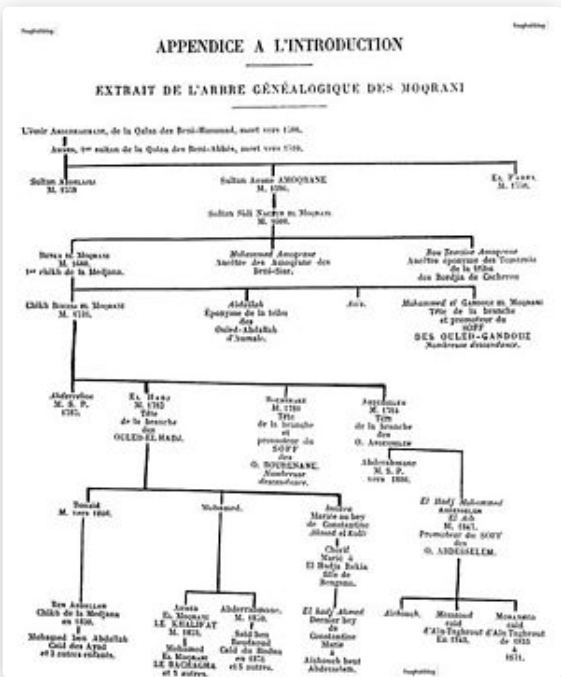
to follow their faith. With these revived forces of 8000 infantry and 3000 horses he launched a campaign in the south. He subjugated [Tolga](#) and [Biskra](#), and reached [Touggourt](#) where he named a member of a loyal tribe, the Hachem, El Hadj Khichan el Merbaï, as Sheikh. One of his close relatives was made Sheikh of the Tolga and Biskra oases, and Abd el-Kader Ben Dia, made khalifa in the Sahara, devoted great energy to defending his Sultan's interests in the region. Ahmed Mokrane established a network of signalling posts on high peaks, which sent messages by fire at night and by smoke during the day to relay messages from the southern domains to the Kalâa. ^[24]

Ahmed Amokrane then turned his attention to the territory of the [Ouled Naïl](#), which he took from [Bou Saâda](#) to [Djelfa](#). The date of these expeditions is generally held to be around 1573. ^[25] This period marks the high point of the kingdom in terms of its governance and the administration of its territories. Ahmed Amokrane was bold enough to send his own son to Algiers in 1580 to welcome the newly arrived Jaafar Pasha. ^[26] By 1590, his influence was such that whole tribes paid tribute to

pillaged the surrounding countryside, razing its villages. Hostilities were eventually ended following mediation by a [marabout](#), which involved Ahmed Amokrane paying a tribute of 30000 douros to secure Khizr Pasha's withdrawal and recognition of his independence. ^[27]

In 1598, it was Ahmed Amokrane who laid siege to Algiers: with the help of the townspeople, he managed to force the gate at [Bab Azoun](#) and breaking into the city, though he could not maintain his hold there. The siege lasted eleven days. ^[28]

17th and 18th centuries



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Family tree of the Amokrane (or Mokrani) according to Louis Rinn (c.1891)

In 1600, Ahmed Amokrane marched against the forces of Soliman Veneziano, Pasha of Algiers, which were trying to enter [Kabylie](#). He defeated them and destroyed Borj



[kabile](#)) which was later arabised as "Mokrani", to his descendants. ^[29]^[30]

His successor was Sidi Naceur Mokrani, who was very religious and surrounded himself with scholars and students of Islam, neglecting the affairs of his kingdom. This provoked the anger of his military commanders and of the merchants of Aït Abbas. Sidi Naceur was ambushed and assassinated in 1620. His children survived however, and his oldest son, Betka Mokrani, was taken in by the Hashemite tribe and raised among them. They helped him regain his princely rank by marrying him to the daughter of the chief of the Ouled Madi. ^[31]

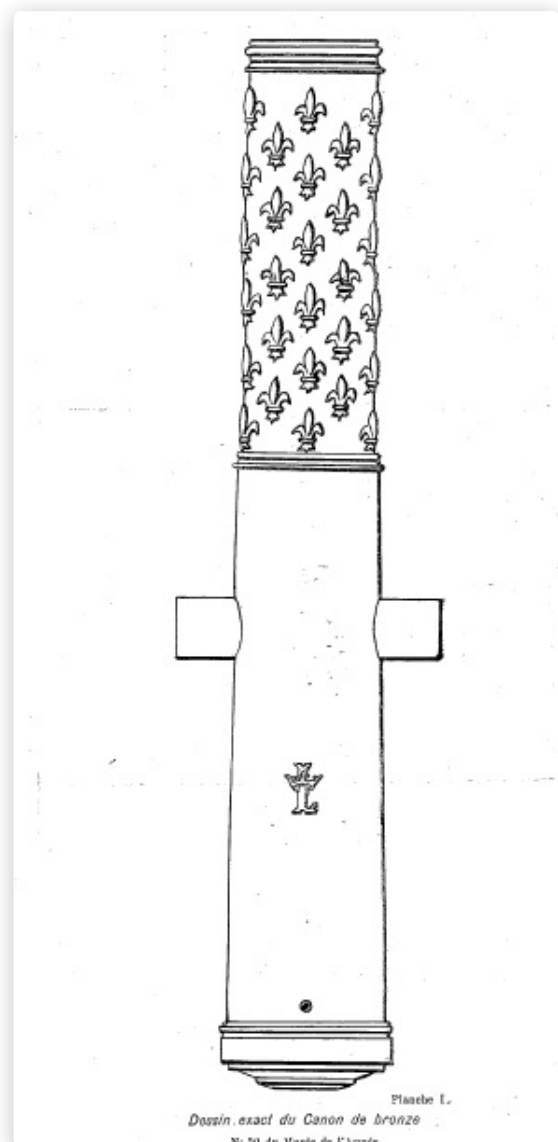
Si Betka took part in the battle of Guidjel on 20 September 1638), at which the tribes fought together with the armies of [Constantine](#) against the Pasha of Algiers. This led to the Beys of Constantine becoming effectively independent of Ottoman rule from Algiers. Si Betka Mokrani simply never recognised the authority of Algiers, and managed to reconquer the lands of his grandfather. However instead of styling himself "Sultan of the Kalâa" he assumed the title "Sheikh of the Medjana". He defeated the Aït Abbas tribe several times, but refused to return to his ancestral seat at the Kalaa. He died in 1680 at his fortress of "Borj Medjana", leaving four sons – Bouzid, Abdallah, Aziz and Mohammed-el-Gandouz. ^[27]^[32]

The oldest son, Bouzid Mokrani, known as sultan Bouzid, ^[note 1] who ruled from 1680 to 1735 on the same terms as his father, entirely free from the authority of Algiers. After a period of dissent from his brothers, he managed to maintain family stability. He twice fought against the Regency of Algiers, which wanted him to allow its armies to cross his territory in

Algiers, he reinstituted the "ouadia", a system which required Algiers to pay him if it wished to move its troops across his land. This arrangement remained in place until the fall of the Regency of Algiers in 1830.^[33] The origins of the ouadia lay in the victory of the Aït Abbas over the Turks in 1553 and 1554, which had effectively made the Mokranis lords of the [Hodna](#) and the Bibans.^[34]

Despite this arrangement, the Mokranis refused to allow passage Algerian troops to cross their land when the French attacked the coast in 1664 during the [Djidjelli Expedition](#). Ali, [king of Kuku](#) likewise refused passage to the armies of Algiers.^[36] Nevertheless, they did join a jihad with Algiers and Constantine to repel the [duke of Beaufort](#), [Louis XIV](#)'s commander.^[37]

The Berbers sought to negotiate with the duke of Beaufort, who was dug in around Djidjelli, but he rejected their peace proposals.^[38] The expedition ended with victory for the Berbers and Turks and a major defeat for Louis XIV, whose armies abandoned their artillery.^[39] The Mokranis took the cannon away to the Kalaa as



Sketch of a cannon from the time of [Louis XIV](#), probably from the [Djidjelli](#)



cannons were also found at the Kalaa later, most probably these date from the time of [Louis XII](#), and were presented by [Francis I of France](#) to Tunis as part of his [alliance with the Ottoman Empire](#). They were then captured by [emperor a Charles V](#) when he [took Tunis](#) in 1535, and transported to [Béjaïa](#), which was a Spanish possession until 1555. From there, it appears that they were passed on to the Aït Abbas when they were Spanish allies.^[41] A smaller cannon, also found in the Kalaa, indicates that there was a local foundry for small-bore guns, operated by a Spanish renegade.^[42]

Dissent and relations with the Beylik of Constantine

After the death of Bouzid Mokrani in 1734, his son El hadj Bouzid Mokrani to power after his older brother Aderrebou Mokrani renounced the succession. He was opposed by two other brothers, Bourenane et Abdesselam Mokrani and by his cousin Aziz ben Gandouz Mokrani, son of Mohammed-el-Gandouz. Aziz created a "soff" (faction) of dissidents who aligned themselves with the Turks, who were known as the Ouled Gandouz.^{[43][44]}

The Turks in Algiers wanted revenge for a massacre in 1737, when an entire column of their troops and its commander had been slaughtered by the "Sheikh of the Medjana" in retaliation for a crime of honour. Allied with the Ouled Gandouz and exploiting divisions between Bourenane et Abdesselam Mokrani, they inflicted defeat on them in 1740. The Aït Abbas had to abandon the Medjana and take refuge in the mountains, with El



[Bordj Bou Arreridj](#), and left a garrison of 300 [janissaries](#) there. They also installed their ally Aziz ben Gandouz Mokrani as caïd, at the head of the Ouled Madi tribe.^[45]

The feuding Mokrani brothers were eventually reconciled by a leader of the [Shadhili](#) order so that they could form a united front against the Turks. They defeated them, demolished the fort at Bordj Bou Arreridj and sent the surviving janissaries back to Algiers with a letter affirming Mokrani independence. El hadj Bouzid Mokrani resumed authority over the Medjana and the Regency of Algiers recognised his independence, renouncing their claim that the tribes under Mokrani control needed to pay taxes to Algiers. Each year, the "Sheikh of the Medjana" was to receive a kaftan of honour from Algiers together with gifts recognising his independence. This diplomatic solution allied the Turks to find pretexts for intervening in Mokrani affairs or demanding support for a faction favourable to them.^[46] The territory of El Hadj Bouzid was a state-within-a-state of the Ottoman domains.^[47]

Before his death in 1783, El hadj Bouzid Mokrani married his daughter Daïkra to the Bey of Constantine, Ahmed el Kolli. He was succeeded by his brother, Abdessalam Mokrani, while his eldest son became heir apparent. The Ouled Bourenane and Ouled Gandouz rebelled however, and this provided a pretext for the Bey to involve himself in Mokrani affairs. Without intervening militarily, he succeeded in getting all the Mokrani clans to weaken each other, recognising as Sheikh whichever of them was able to send him tribute.^[46]



they received it in the form of the "ouadia", which gave him the right to march his troops over their land. He recognised the right of the Sheikh of the Medjana to administer justice, and it was agreed that the fort at [Bordj Bou Arreridj](#) was not to be rebuilt. In 1803 the Mokranis faced a peasant revolt from the Ouled Derradj, Madid, Ayad, Ouled Khelouf, Ouled-Brahim and Ouled Teben, led by sheikh Ben el Harche.^[48] Ben el Harche, a religious leader, defeated the army of Osman Bey, who died in battle.^[49] He based himself in the Djebel Megris, but died fighting in 1806 after two battles against the Mokranis, supported by a column of a Turkish troops from the Bey.^[48]

After numerous fratricidal struggles, by 1825 there were no more than two Mokrani factions with any real power: the Ouled el Hadj and the Ouled Abdesselem. These two groups were led by Ben Abdallah Mokrani, who held the title "Sheikh of the Medjana". The appointment of Ahmed Bey as Bey of Constantine, who was himself a relative of the Mokrani, led to further clan disputes, and Ahmed Bey was able to eliminate a number of Mokrani before being defeated by those who remained, from the dissident groups of Ouled Bourenane and Ouled Gandouz.^[50]

Ben Abdallah Mokrani had two lieutenants, Ahmed Mokrani and his cousin Abdesselem Mokrani. He entrusted the latter with collecting taxes for him in the [Bibans](#). This lucrative task was coveted by Ahmed Mokrani, making it the starting point of a rivalry which lasted until the arrival of the French. The two lieutenants joined the forces of Ahmed Bey which went to the assistance of the Dey of Algiers in 1830.^[51]



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After the fall of Algiers

News of the fall of [Hussein Dey](#) spread rapidly across the country, carried by defeated tribesmen returning to their homelands. As the Turkish elite enjoyed no public sympathy, a series of uprisings threatened the foundations of Algerian society. This period of turbulence saw the strengthening of traditional tribal confederations and social arrangements which the Regency of Algiers had worked to diminish. Aside from the tribal confederations in the mountainous regions, it was the traditional [marabout](#) elements and the hereditary leadership, known as the "djouad" – which included the Mokrani – who took the lead in reasserting their positions. ^[48]

In the west of the country it was the marabouts who predominated, leading to the emergence of [Emir Abdelkader](#). In the east, the "djouad" were more firmly established, as was the Beylik of Constantine. The resilience of the beylik was largely due to the flexible policies of Ahmed

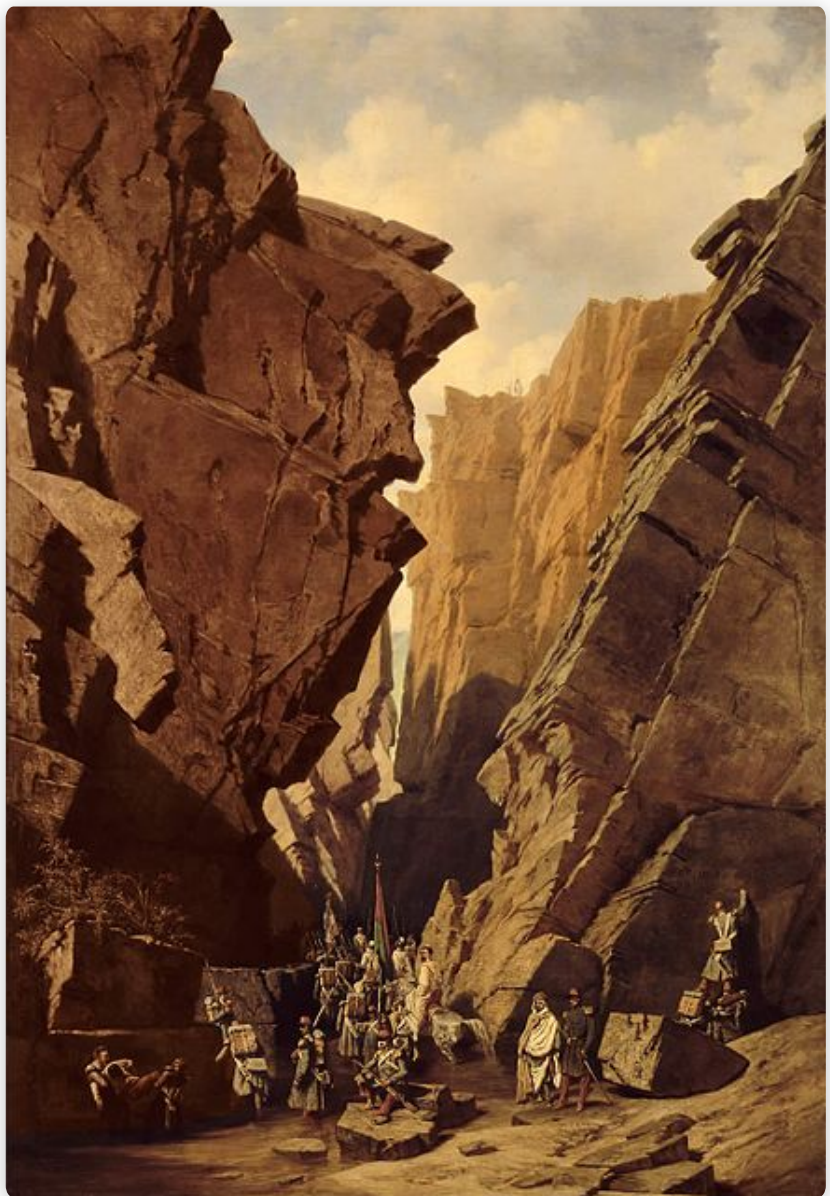


divided the Mokrani family, as Abdesselem Mokrani supported the rebels in the name of Ben Abdallah Mokrani, Sheikh of the Medjana. His cousin and rival Ahmed Mokrani however remained loyal to Ahmed Bey. He and other chiefs allied to the Bey, including sheikh Bengana, managed to win back or bribe various rebel tribes, so that their insurrection came to nothing.^[52]

In 1831, Abdesselem Mokrani and his allies proposed that the French recognise their authority, in return for a military effort that they hoped would help them get rid of Ahmed Bey. The French would not entertain this proposal however. A similar letter sent to the Bey of Tunis [Al-Husayn II ibn Mahmud](#) was intercepted by Ahmed Bey. Abdesselem Mokrani was subsequently captured and imprisoned in [Constantine](#). Ahmed Mokrani was appointed sheikh of the Medjana by Ahmed Bey, in the place of Ben Abdallah Mokrani who soon died. Ahmed Mokrani took part in the defence of Constantine in 1836, and again when the city fell to the French in 1837. His rival Abdesselem Mokrani, took advantage of the chaos to escape from Constantine in 1837.^[53]

The period of the khalifas

Ahmed Mokrani followed Ahmed Bey and fled to the south before returning to his territory and falling back on the [Kalâa of Ait Abbas](#); his rival Abdesselem Mokrani meanwhile took possession of the Medjana plain. In December 1837, when the [Emir Abdelkader](#) arrived in the Biban mountains to organise the administration of a region he considered to be part of his realm, each of the rivals offered allegiance to him if he



A group crossing the Iron Gates pass in 1839. To make use of this narrow route, the Regency of Algiers paid the



Abdesselem Mokrani was in a better position, it was he whom Abdelkader recognised as "khalifa of the Medjana."^[54] Ahmed Mokrani was unable to overthrow his cousin, who was supported by the Hachem, the Ouled Madi of Msila and the marabouts. Even the Aït Abbas tribe, until then favouring Ahmed Mokrani, saw unrest grow against him in [Ighil Ali](#), Tazaert and Azrou. To avoid being cut off in the Kalaa, he had to take refuge with the neighbouring Beni Yadel tribe at [El Main](#).^[55] In the end he was captured by Abdesselem Mokrani who exiled him to the [Hodna](#).

At the end of July 1838 Ahmed Mokrani escaped and presented himself to the French authorities in Constantine. Having been appointed caïd by them, he was also given, on 30 September, the title "khalifa of the Medjana" by the French, who had by now occupied [Sétif](#).^[56] The title "khalifa" was used only in territories where the French did not exercise direct rule and which enjoyed the same privileges as they had under the Beylik of Constantine. "Khalifas" received local taxes on behalf of the state, maintained a guard of [spahis](#) paid for by France and governed their people according to Islamic law. These allies were invaluable to the French as supporters of their rule in a country they barely yet knew.^[57]

In 1838 Abdesselem Mokrani was dismissed by Emir Abdelkader and replaced by his "khodja" (secretary), a man of marabout rather than noble pedigree. This was considered an affront for a "djouad", but was accepted by Abdesselem Mokrani as a means of blocking the advances of his cousin Ahmed Mokrani who was extending his alliances and influence. Ahmed encouraged the French to conduct the Iron Gates expedition in October



pass through unmolested. Using this route allowed the French to take more effective control of the area and to link Algiers with Constantine.^[59] Abdesselem Mokrani was left with no real support, Ahmed Mokrani had rebuilt his domain with French assistance. Emir Abdelkader considered the Iron Gates to be part of his own territory, and therefore declared war on France and on the local chiefs who supported her. The resulting conflict had serious consequences for the Medjana, and Ahmed Mokrani, allied to the French, was forced to retreat into the [Kalâa of Ait Abbas](#). The followers of Abdelkader were finally repulsed in 1841. After this Ahmed Mokrani ruled his territories with little regard for French authority, remaining however in contact with captain Dargent in the base at Sétif^{[60][61]}

His standing as a French ally continued to change. A French Royal ordinance of 15 April 1845 superseded the decrees of 1838 and gave him the status of a high official. Some tribes of the [Ouled Naïl](#), Aït Yaala, Qsar, Sebkra, Beni Mansour, Beni Mellikech and the Biban mountains were detached from his command and placed under the authority of more pliable nobles or caïds. In 1849, the tribes of the Hodna were similarly removed from his control.^[62] It was against this background that one of the leading figures of kabylie resistance to the French emerged in the person of Chérif Boubaghla.^[63] In 1851 he began moving through the Medjana plain, the Kalaa, and the lands of the Beni Mellikech who had still not submitted to the French. Though the intermediary of a man named Djersba Ben Bouda, who was intendant of the Kalaa, Boubaghla sent Ahmed Mokrani a letter proposing war against the French, but the "khalifa" did not take this proposal seriously. Instead, he provided support for the columns of French

rival Abdesselem, by accusing them of supporting Boubaghla. He died in 1854 at Marseille while returning from a visit to France, and his son

[Mohamed Mokrani](#) was named Bachagha. ^[64]

Collapse of Mokrani authority

Main article: [Mokrani Revolt](#)

The title "bachagha" ([Turkish](#) : başağā , chief commander) was a creation of the French authorities, denoting an intermediate status between "caid" and "khalifa". The "khalifas", still of major importance, was later suppressed. The French continued to appoint "caids" and commanders for the tribes previously assigned to Ahmed Mokrani.

In 1858, he was obliged to turn over some fines which he had collected in his own name to the French treasury. The [zakat](#) tax, already paid in kind to the Mokranis, was introduced in the [Bordj Bou Arreridj](#) region. The Hachem tribe was also obliged to pay the "achour" (tithe), and eventually the Mokrani themselves were brought under the cash payment system. In 1858 and 1859 they were granted an exemption however, ostensibly because of poor harvests, but in fact in order to accommodate them politically. ^[65]



Portrait of the bachagha
[Mohamed Mokrani](#).



1860 saw the suppression of the right of feudal lords to administer and the right to the "khedma", which tradiionally allowed the beneficiary to claim a fee in return for bearing letters or orders from the administration (formerly, on behalf of the Bey). These measures provoked discontent among the traditional chiefs allied to France, but they still sought to avoid armed conflict and hoped that the French would continue to bed them to administer the territory. The reassuring official statements from the French governmen⁵ and from [Napoleon III](#) about the role of the Algerian feudal nobility were unconvincing and unsupported by deeds. The transfer from military to civilian rule prompted Mohamed Mokrani to resign from his position as bachagha, and by 1870 he had begun to seriously consider rebellion. ^[66]

In parallel with the political situation, the years 1865 and 1866 were a social disaster for Algeria, where they were commonly referred to as "am ech cher" (the years of misery). A plague of locusts followed by a drought plunged the country into famine, followed by epidemics of [cholera](#) and [typhus](#). The traditional leaders emptied their personal granaries to feed their people, and once these were exhausted, borrowed to keep them supplied. ^[67] These loans were later to place Mohamed Mokrani in difficulties. ^[68]

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